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How has Hamas's rule and Israel's blockade affected Palestinians in Gaza?

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A wall at Netiv HaAsara facing the Gaza border. Photo by Cole Keister on Unsplash (public domain).

With the recent escalation in the war between Israel and Hamas, context is vital to understanding the complex history behind the stream of news coverage.

In this edited extract from The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: What Everyone Needs to Know®, *author Dov Waxman addresses one key question of the conflict — how has Hamas's rule and Israel's blockade affected Palestinians in Gaza?*

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For more than a decade now, Palestinians in Gaza have been suffering the harsh consequences of living under Hamas rule and an Israeli blockade of their territory. Although it is popular, and often politically convenient, to blame either Hamas or Israel for the hardships and misery that Gazans have experienced, the truth is that both parties are responsible (as is, to a lesser extent, Egypt and the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority). Hamas and Israel have been engaged in a prolonged, intermittently violent struggle at the expense of Gaza's civilian population. The consequences for the 1.9 million Palestinians in Gaza have been dire. They have endured economic deprivation, collective confinement, political and social repression, and recurrent bouts of intense fighting between Israel and Hamas in which thousands of civilians have been killed and many more wounded, left homeless, and traumatized. Crowded into a narrow strip of land just 25 miles (40 kilometers) long and 6 miles (10 kilometers) wide, most Gazans have been unable to leave for the past decade, trapped in what is often described as the world's largest open-air prison. In fact, since the average age of its population is just 16 years old, many, if not most, of Gaza's inhabitants have never left the area, giving rise to a widespread sense of claustrophobia, frustration, and despair.

To be sure, Gaza was already becoming impoverished and isolated before Hamas took over in 2007. This was not always the case. Gaza's poverty rate was once roughly the same as that of the United States (16% in Gaza in 1994, compared with 14.5% in the United States). But as Gazans lost their jobs in Israel during the 1990s (while the Oslo peace process took place), unemployment and poverty increased. The Second Intifada made things worse as tourism ended and foreign investment dried up. Gazans were also restricted in their ability to leave the territory long before Israel largely sealed its border after Hamas's takeover. During the First Intifada, Israel began requiring Palestinians to obtain a permit to travel between Gaza and the West Bank, and during the Second Intifada it became very difficult for Palestinians in either territory to enter Israel. After Israel's withdrawal in 2005 it placed more restrictions on the movement of people and goods into and out of Gaza, and it tightened these restrictions after Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections and then rejected the demands of the Quartet to recognize Israel, renounce violence, and respect previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements.

By the time Hamas seized sole control over Gaza in June 2007, socioeconomic conditions inside Gaza had been deteriorating for years (especially after Israel withdrew). Since then, things have become even worse as Gaza's economy has slowly collapsed. By 2015, a decade after Israel's withdrawal, Gaza's economy was, according to the World Bank, the world's worst performing economy, with the world's highest level of unemployment. Per-capita income in Gaza had fallen from $1,375 in 2005 to $970 in 2015, and the unemployment rate had risen from 30% to 43%. Unemployment has continued to increase in recent years, with more than half of Gaza's adult population in 2018 unemployed and over 70% of young people.

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The economic circumstances of Palestinians in Gaza, therefore, are far worse under Hamas rule than they were under Israeli rule. To be fair, this is not only Hamas's fault. It can justifiably be blamed for allocating scarce resources toward building up its own military capabilities — Hamas has spent a lot of money acquiring arms and building an elaborate network of underground tunnels — rather than channelling them toward Gaza's residents. Hamas can also be blamed for its role in provoking three major Israeli military offensives (in 2008–2009, 2012, and 2014) that destroyed or damaged much of Gaza's infrastructure. But the biggest reason for the steep decline of Gaza's economy has been Israel's land, air, and naval blockade of the territory. In September 2007, soon after Hamas's takeover, the Israeli government declared Gaza to be a "hostile entity" and strictly limited what could come in or out of Gaza through the border crossings that Israel still controlled. With few exceptions (mostly for businesspeople and medical patients), Palestinians have been prohibited from leaving or entering Gaza, and imports and exports have been heavily restricted — though, under international pressure, Israel has gradually eased some of these restrictions since 2010.

The officially stated purpose of Israel's blockade is to prevent Hamas from importing weapons or other items that it needs to build rockets or dig what the Israeli media likes to call "terror tunnels." Unofficially, however, the Israeli blockade is aimed not only at carefully monitoring and regulating the flow of goods and people but also at preventing Gaza from prospering and economically developing under Hamas's rule. As one Israeli official succinctly put it, the blockade is designed to make sure that there is "no prosperity, no development, [and] no humanitarian crisis" in Gaza. Similarly, a classified US diplomatic cable from 2008, published by Wikileaks, stated that the aim of the blockade was to "keep the Gazan economy on the brink of collapse without quite pushing it over the edge." This is not meant to simply punish Gazans, as some of Israel's critics contend. Rather, the intention is to diminish Hamas's popular appeal among Palestinians. If living under Hamas rule entails poverty,

deprivation, and isolation, then Palestinians will be less willing to support it, so the theory goes. In short, the blockade is designed to weaken Hamas politically, not only militarily. Doing so, it is hoped, will at least prevent Hamas from taking over the West Bank as well (initially some Israeli officials also hoped that the blockade might eventually lead Palestinians in Gaza to oust Hamas from power).

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Israel's blockade of Gaza is part of a broader "containment" strategy that it has adopted since Hamas's takeover. Rather than try to forcefully remove Hamas from power in Gaza, or somehow replace it with the Palestinian Authority (PA), Israel has pursued a more limited and, arguably, less risky and less costly strategy (to itself) to contain Hamas and prevent it from becoming more powerful (much as the United States tried to do vis-à-vis the Soviet Union for most of the Cold War). Whether Israel's containment strategy toward Hamas has succeeded so far is debatable. The Israeli blockade has made it much harder for Hamas to obtain advanced weaponry, but this has forced it to manufacture its own weapons, including missiles and drones. By depriving Hamas of much-needed revenue, the blockade has also made it harder for the group to govern Gaza, pay civil servants, and deliver basic services to its residents (and because of the international boycott of Hamas's government, a lot of foreign aid money has also been diverted away from Gaza toward the PA in the West Bank). But Hamas has still been able to maintain order and stability in Gaza, keep all the government ministries there running, keep the healthcare and education systems functioning (just about), and, with the help of funding from regional patrons such as Iran and Qatar, managed to provide essential services to Gazans.

Hamas has lost some popular support among Palestinians, and has become widely unpopular among those living in Gaza in particular, but the erosion of support for Hamas has not resulted in a resurgence of support for its main political rival, Fatah, or for its leader, PA President Mahmoud Abbas. Nor can Hamas's unpopularity among Gazans simply be attributed to the effects of Israel's blockade of Gaza. Its unpopularity may well have as much to do with Hamas's authoritarian governance of Gaza and its well-documented human rights violations as it does with the dismal state of Gaza's economy (for which Israel is generally

blamed). Moreover, while the Israeli blockade has weakened Hamas in some respects, it has, paradoxically, strengthened it in others, allowing the group to reward its supporters with jobs, resources, and permits (and deny them to its opponents). Some observers, therefore, argue that the blockade has actually helped entrench Hamas's rule in Gaza instead of undermining it.

What Israel's blockade of Gaza has, incontrovertibly, ensured is that most Gazans have not prospered under Hamas rule. Israeli restrictions on Gaza's imports and exports have had a very damaging impact on its economy, especially on the private sector, since the vast majority of those imports and exports used to go through Israel. Until 2013, the economic and humanitarian impact of the blockade was alleviated to some degree by the willingness of Gaza's other neighbor, Egypt, to allow goods and people to pass through its border crossing with Gaza in the Sinai. Egypt also largely tolerated the development of a "tunnel economy" running beneath its border with Gaza. To circumvent the Israeli blockade, hundreds of sophisticated underground tunnels were dug between Egypt and Gaza, and they were used to smuggle everything from weapons to consumer goods and even cars. Gazans came to rely upon what was, quite literally, an underground economy based on smuggling. In 2009, for instance, it was estimated that 80% of all imports into Gaza were smuggled in through the tunnels between Gaza and Sinai. Hamas also benefited from this "tunnel economy," as it oversaw the construction and operation of the tunnels, collected revenues from them, and brought in whatever it needed. This all changed after the 2013 military coup in Egypt, which ousted President Morsi and brought to power Egypt's current president, the hardline former general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Under President Sisi — who views Gaza through the lens of Egyptian domestic security concerns and regards Hamas as an enemy of Egypt because of its ties with the now-banned Muslim Brotherhood and alleged support for jihadist insurgents in the Sinai region — Egypt has generally closed its border with Gaza. In 2015, the Egyptian military shut down the smuggling industry that operated below the Sinai border by blocking and flooding the tunnels. This has deprived Hamas of a major source of revenue and many Gazans of their only source of income.

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Egypt's frequent closure of its border and its crackdown on smuggling have severely exacerbated the impact of Israel's blockade of Gaza. Combined, they have had a cumulatively devastating impact on Gaza's inhabitants. Living standards in Gaza have declined, roughly three-quarters of the population now depends upon humanitarian aid, more than half live in poverty, and about a fifth live in "extreme poverty." Along with rampant poverty, food

insecurity and malnutrition are now widespread (especially among children), and infant and child mortality rates have increased. Due to fuel shortages, the supply of electricity has been severely limited, sometimes to only a few hours a day. Not only does this lack of electricity seriously affect the daily life of most Palestinians in Gaza, it also affects Gaza's hospitals, sanitation and sewage facilities, and water supply. As humanitarian conditions in Gaza have steadily deteriorated over the past few years, the UN has repeatedly sounded the alarm. In 2015, it issued a report warning that Gaza would become uninhabitable by 2020. The next year, another UN report described the territory as "effectively unlivable," and in March 2018, the UN's humanitarian coordinator declared that "Gaza is on the brink of catastrophe." Despite these stark warnings, the international community has done little to stop the emerging humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Many countries have not even fulfilled their financial pledges to help to pay for reconstruction in Gaza following the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas. And, in 2018 the Trump administration stopped US funding for UNRWA, which provides emergency food aid to around a million Palestinians in Gaza.

Many parties bear some responsibility for the dire and increasingly desperate socioeconomic and humanitarian conditions inside Gaza — primarily Israel, Egypt, and Hamas. Only Hamas, however, is responsible for the authoritarian and oppressive manner in which it has governed Gaza. Under Hamas rule, Gaza has been like a one-party state. Political opposition, principally Hamas's rival Fatah, has been heavily repressed, along with independent media outlets and local nongovernmental organizations. Hamas's regime in Gaza has restricted Palestinians there from exercising their civil and political rights, and it has committed numerous human rights violations, such as abductions, arbitrary detentions, and even extrajudicial killings. In some respects, Hamas's government in Gaza is probably no worse than the PA's government in the West Bank. According to local and international human rights groups, both Palestinian governments have suppressed domestic dissent, cracked down on civil society, arbitrarily arrested people, and mistreated and even tortured detainees. And while Hamas has tried to eradicate Fatah's presence in Gaza, Fatah has tried to crush Hamas in the West Bank, imprisoning many of its members (with the help of Israel's security forces).

In terms of their methods of governance, then, Hamas and Fatah are quite alike — unaccountable, sometimes brutal, and far from democratic. The most significant practical difference between them as rulers (besides their contrasting approaches to the conflict with Israel) is that Hamas, unlike Fatah, wants to "Islamize" Palestinian society (that is, make it more Islamic). Hamas has tried to do this since it took power in Gaza, but its approach has been cautious and piecemeal. It has not sought to turn Gaza into an Islamic theocracy (like Iran or Afghanistan under the Taliban) or a caliphate (like the Islamic State briefly established in Iraq and Syria). Instead, its model, if it has one, is the illiberal Islamist government in Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (who has been an outspoken supporter of

Hamas). Rather than Islamizing Gaza's institutions, Hamas, so far at least, has largely focused on encouraging and at times imposing more "Islamic" and conservative mores (by, for example, informally policing what women wear in public, preventing mixed-gender gatherings, and closing shops selling supposedly "un-Islamic" products). In doing so, Hamas's leadership in Gaza has balanced their commitment to the group's Islamist ideology with their desire to maintain power in Gaza and gain international legitimacy. The same balancing act between ideological imperatives and practical considerations has shaped Hamas's approach to Israel since it took power, particularly its use of force against Israel (what it calls its "armed resistance").

Dov Waxman is the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation Professor of Israel Studies at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) and the director of the UCLA Y&S Nazarian Center for Israel Studies.

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